The Golden Axe
Based on a Fable by Aesop

What details suggest that this story is a fable?

A humble woodcutter chopped trees daily in the forest. Late one afternoon, he chose his final tree, which stood beside a deep green pool. The strokes the weary woodcutter took were less accurate than usual. After a mighty swing, his trusty axe slipped from his grip, flew headfirst into the water, and disappeared into the green abyss.

“Woe unto me!” he bellowed. The axe was his only possession with which to earn a living; he lacked the money to obtain another. But he could neither swim nor dive to retrieve his axe from such depths. As he shed bitter tears, the winged god Mercury suddenly appeared to investigate his misery. Embarrassed, the woodcutter explained how he lost his axe.

Instantly, Mercury plunged deep into the pool to recover the drowned axe. But the axe Mercury retrieved was made of glittering gold. “Is this your axe?” the god asked.

The truthful woodcutter replied, “No, kind Mercury. That axe is wonderful beyond description, but it’s not mine.” Mercury set the gold axe on the ground and dove again to the depths of the pool. Now he retrieved an axe of shimmering silver. Again, the sincere woodman thanked the winged god, but described his axe as an ordinary iron tool with a well-worn wooden handle.

So Mercury dove a third time, returning with the axe the woodcutter had lost. “My axe!” he cried in gratitude. “This modest tool enables me to earn my living; without it I’d be lost. My deepest thanks, O Mercury.”

Accepting the woodcutter’s appreciation, the god said, “Because I admire your honesty, you may possess all three axes—the gold, the silver, and your own.” The astonished woodcutter knelt to Mercury and then trekked home with the three axes.

Accounts of the woodcutter’s good fortune spread rapidly. Other woodcutters believed that they could increase their wealth by losing an axe—or pretending to—and appealing to Mercury for divine help. One by one, other woodcutters hid their axes in bushes, caves, or deep bodies of water, and waited for Mercury’s assistance.

Winged Mercury appeared to investigate each man’s plight. Each time, Mercury displayed an axe of glistening gold, which the man excitedly claimed as the one he’d unfortunately lost. But instead of “returning” the gold axe, Mercury used it to deliver to the deceitful woodcutter’s head a sharp thwack, sending him home in pain, but without any axe at all.
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Answer each question. Give evidence from the fable.

1. The pool in the forest was an abyss (line 7) because it was very __________________________.
   - A. green  - B. clear  - C. deep  - D. cool
   What evidence in the text helped you answer? _______________________________________________________________________

2. Which of the following is the most reasonable moral for this story?
   - A. Honesty is the best policy.  - B. One good turn deserves another.
   - C. Things aren’t always as they seem.  - D. A pool may not always return lost tools.
   How did you determine your response? _______________________________________________________________________

3. Why was the woodcutter’s axe handle so well-worn? _______________________________________________________________________

4. Explain why the woodcutter felt embarrassed (line 14). _______________________________________________________________________

5. How would you describe the character of Mercury? _______________________________________________________________________

6. What makes a story a fable? Explain. _______________________________________________________________________


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1. C; Sample answer: I picked C because the woodcutter knew he couldn't swim or dive in such depths (lines 10–12), and Mercury plunged deep into the pool (line 16).
2. A; Sample answer: The only woodcutter who was honest was the first one. He not only got his axe back (lines 24–26), but was rewarded as well (lines 27–30). Those who lied were punished (lines 36–40).
3. Sample answer: The woodcutter used it every day for his work (lines 1–2), and didn't have the money to be able to replace it (lines 8–10).
4. Sample answer: The woodcutter was embarrassed having to explain to a god that he lost his axe because it flew out of his hands and that he was too poor to get a new one (lines 8–15).
5. Sample answer: Mercury was caring and helpful (lines 16–30), but didn't tolerate lying or trickery (lines 38–40).
6. Sample answer: A fable is a short and simple story, often with talking animals or gods. It is written to teach a useful life lesson.

Answers